

### Be Smart — Choose Freedom:

# New Jersey Unveils Its Crime Prevention Campaign

By Deirdre Fedkenheuer

Perhaps more than in any other realm of law enforcement, it is the corrections professional who witnesses the broken dreams, the societal ills and economic disasters that are precipitated by the unprecedented number of young people flooding into the nation's prisons and jails. The New Jersey Department of Corrections, under the direction of Commissioner Devon Brown, has culled literally hundreds of years of correctional experience and packaged these crime prevention precepts into seven 30- to 60-second public service announcements with but one thought — stemming the tide of incarcerated youths.

"The public service announcements send the strong message that crime and incarceration are not acceptable options and that jail should be regarded as the most negative of four-letter words," said Brown. "We believe that these announcements, encapsulating the theme 'Be Smart — Choose Freedom,' will in some meaningful way help to deter young people from criminal involvement."

With the fear of crime prevalent among American citizens coexisting with a political climate of decreased tolerance for those who commit criminal offenses, it seems especially timely to explore the potentially beneficial role of corrections in crime prevention. By broadcasting the public service announcements, television stations are joining the DOC in forming a crime-prevention strategy intended to reach citizens throughout New Jersey and neighboring states.

Due to the vast number of people now under correctional supervision, penal systems have assumed increased presence as social institutions. As such, in subtle yet significant ways, jails and prisons have inadvertently begun to impact and shape American culture due in large part to the immense number of those who are exposed to these settings. As an unfortunate outcome of these circumstances, corrections has, and will continue to have, a powerful, yet covert influence on the country's values and way of life — unless the rate of incarceration drastically declines. The facts on which these sentiments are based can readily be seen in the following:

- The enormous number of offenders, particularly minorities, entering correctional facilities statewide (in New Jersey, approximately 81 percent of those in prison are black or Hispanic) and nationwide;
- The obvious yet insidious assimilation of prison culture by the nation's youths — most notably reflected

in the style of dress (i.e., pants hanging well below the waist);

- The alarming lyrics frequently contained in music popular among youths of all races; and
- The increasing glorification of aggression, indiscriminate and/or criminal behavior in many of the most popular video games and movies.

The message conveyed by these and other sources to U.S. youths is highly nonconstructive, socially destructive and unacceptable. Such a message minimizes the importance of community and depicts situations where right and wrong are often determined by physical power, negatively achieved wealth and undeserved influence, rather than by personal integrity and adherence to strong moral convictions.

Brown is of the firm opinion that it is time for corrections professionals to step forward to share their experiences and concerns. Through a partnership with the media, he would like to resound the message that jail and prison are not glamorous, they are not a "right of passage" into adulthood, and they should not be regarded as "business necessities" or the mere cost of achieving peer approval.

Although it may appear contradictory, correctional administrators would like to be in the business of putting themselves out of business. The commissioner is convinced that there is no better group to speak on the perils of incarceration than corrections professionals, as they must deal with these tragedies each day, up close and direct.

"It is our collective belief that we cannot afford to sit idly, watching the dreams of our children disintegrate, knowing that more could have been done to avert this situation," Brown said. "These public service announcements are the latest tool the department has employed as a positive intervention that may well keep a child from entering the criminal justice system. They join two programs we host, all in the name of crime prevention. Through GAPP [Gang Awareness and Prevention Program], inmates who have renounced their gang membership talk frankly to youngsters in middle and high school, civic groups and law enforcement entities. Additionally, the department originated another program, Project PRIDE [Promoting Responsibility in Drug Education], which brings youthful inmates into schools throughout New Jersey to discuss the ill-advised choices they made — choices that led to their incarceration."

GAPP and Project PRIDE have been hailed throughout the state, by the New Jersey General Assembly and Senate, law enforcement entities and civic groups, as worthy programs that educate, inform and enlighten. Proof of their success can be measured by the repeat business engendered from school principals and elected officials statewide.

But Brown, like generals of old, has planned his campaign carefully with a multipronged attack on the problem of incarcerated youths. In addition to the public service announcements and programming, another simple, yet effective technique has been used. Two large signs have been placed at the gates of the DOC's Central Office headquarters in Trenton, which is located next to a grammar school. One reads, "JAIL — Please teach your children that it's the worst of four-letter words." The other, equally succinct, states, "The worst thing that you can do is to establish a criminal record. Avoid it at all costs." The department logo appears next to the words. "Every parent and child who arrives at that school reads those words twice a day," Brown said.

The posters also have been made available to schools and municipalities, as well as prisons, all over the state. In that same vein, the DOC is working in tandem with the state Department of Transportation with the hope that these same simple, yet powerful posters can be displayed on New Jersey Transit trains, buses and stations.

Too often, corrections has been perceived as the illegitimate sibling in the law enforcement family, due in part to a

relatively low public profile. Since the majority of citizens base their opinions about corrections on old James Cagney movies and salacious cable dramas, an unintentional byproduct of Brown's crime prevention campaign is a new awareness of, and appreciation for, the corrections professional.

"We are more than razor ribbon and clanging doors, guard towers and sally ports," Brown said. "We are trained professionals for the 21st century, men and women who are committed to public safety, in our prisons and neighborhoods, and dedicated to the vision of zero inmate population growth. We have received hundreds of calls from schools, concerned parents, municipal police officers, executives in the private sector and concerned citizens from all over the tri-state area, commending the department on our message and requesting GAPP and Project PRIDE presentations and copies of the public service announcements. If even one young man or woman thinks twice before indulging in risky behavior, our efforts have been justified."

Visitors to the New Jersey DOC Web site, [www.state.nj.us/corrections](http://www.state.nj.us/corrections), can view the public service announcements, including one geared toward females and one in Spanish. Information about GAPP and Project PRIDE can be obtained by contacting the DOC's Public Information Office at (609) 292-9340 or [pubinfo@doc.state.nj.us](mailto:pubinfo@doc.state.nj.us).

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